HOW TO COLLABORATE EFFECTIVELY WITH DISTANT STAKEHOLDERS USING

CollaboraZon

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Introduction

The idea for CollaboraZon was sparked whilst working for a client, as our project required communication with an external contractor company and many other external stakeholders. The entire exchange of documents and comments was done via email and forced all the participants to save different versions of the product/text in their local file system. This proved to be a source of confusion, as documents were lost due to the duplication of files, making it difficult to keep track of conversations, stakeholders referring to different versions of the same document, etc.

In addition to this, the writing, delivery and revisions of documents were always submitted to deadlines which were not always remembered by all stakeholders as they were marked in separate calendars which were not synchronised, leading to some additional confusion.

Given the success of the cloud, and the growing number and popularity of social networks, we decided to combine these elements and create **CollaboraZon**.

CollaboraZon is a website where you can set up your own network of collaborators, store your files in the cloud (the same way you would in any other file system), share files and information, work on them via posts and comments, and create events and meetings.

It occurred to us that different organisations have different needs, which prompted us to develop two different versions of **CollaboraZon** with the same functionalities - one for private users and one for companies.

Please visit our site and watch the introductory video for additional information:

www.collaborazon.com

Business Challenge

Companies (or individuals) when working for a project that requires communication with many stakeholders spread across the globe, generally use emails and attachments to share files and conversations.
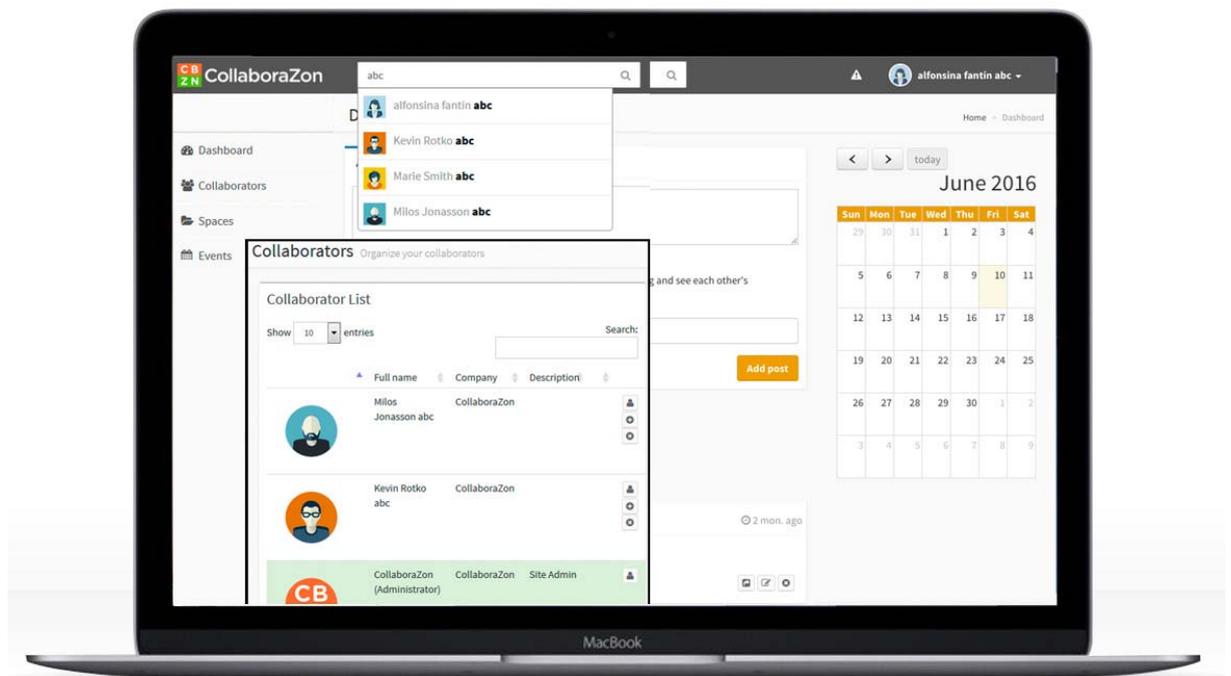
This system has many disadvantages:

- It is not centralized: Each user uses his own client or desktop software which stores conversations locally.
- Attachments need to be downloaded to the user's PC and stored locally as well.
- It is **not** a document management tool: The files attached are not organised and each user will store them locally with his own folder structure and link between email conversation and files risk to be lost.
- Version control is difficult. If a new version of the same file is received in another email, this commonly leads users to talk about different versions which invariably leads to misunderstandings and unnecessary delays
- Conversations can be lost. Due to limitation in the storage of emails, many users clean up their mailboxes leading to the elimination of important information.
- Searching for files in emails is not easy.

The same is true for calendar events or deadlines.

Solution Description

CollaboraZon is an application where all documents can be stored centrally in the cloud (or in your file servers in the Enterprise version) and can be shared with the people who have the right to see them. If collaborators need to have a discussion, they can do this via posts and comments - as is the case with most social networks. If an event is created, it can be also shared with all people involved, ensuring that everybody is aware of the project calendar.
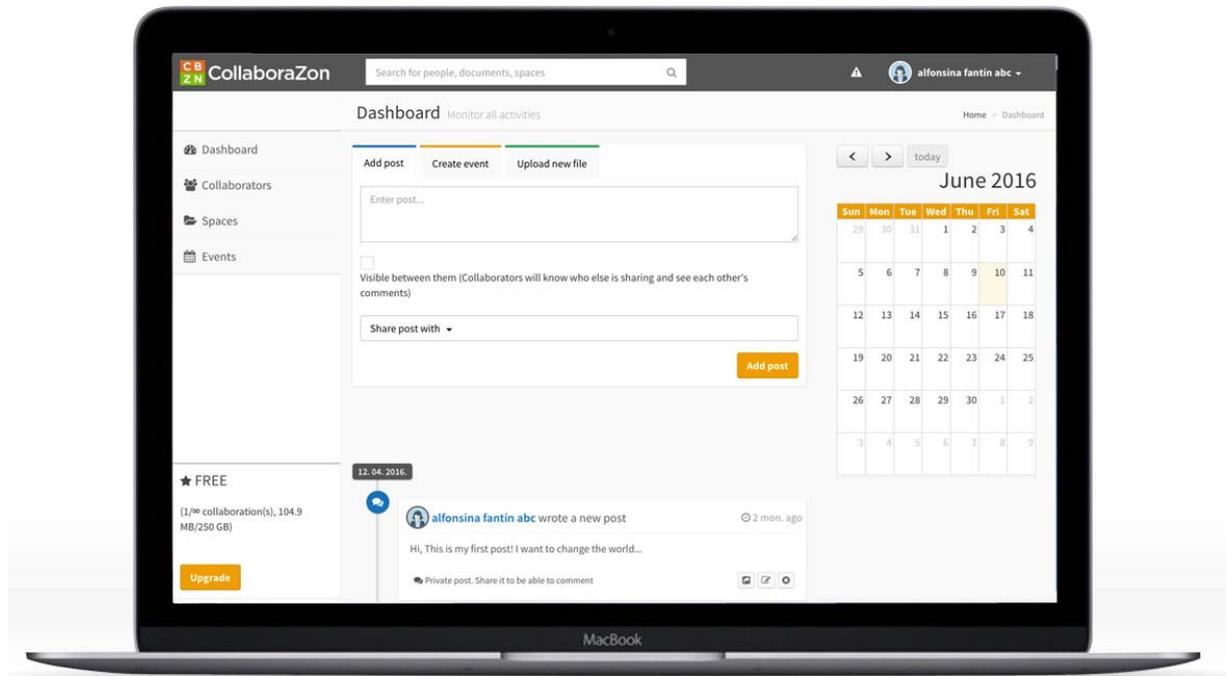
Create your network of collaborators

Find people who are already registered in the application and identify collaborators. If someone has not registered yet, you can send him and invitation via the application. Once he signs up, you will be able to start collaborating right away.

By giving a description to your collaborations, you will always be able to have an overview of the people you are working with.

Posts/Comments

Start conversations by posting your comments, as you would in any other social network. Any time you upload a file or create an event, a post will be also created automatically, so you will be able to have a conversation on that event or file as well.
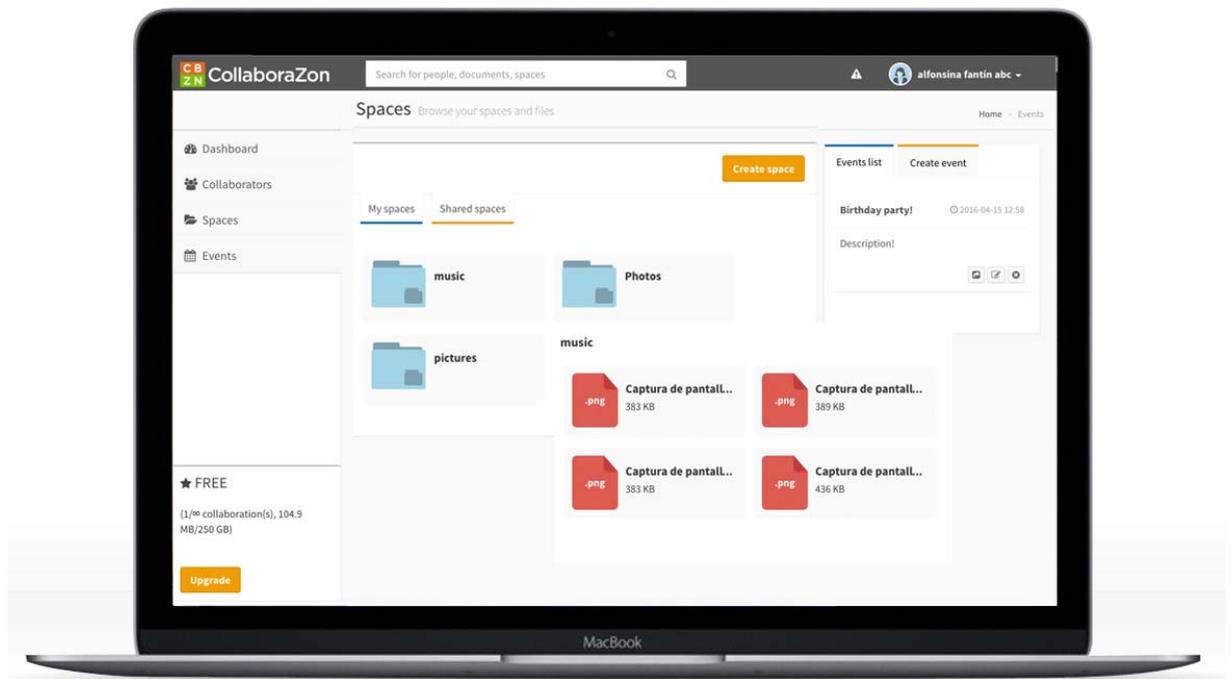
The difference with other social networks lies in the way posts are shared. Exclusively people that you have chosen amongst your collaborators list will be able to see the post and comment on it. Furthermore, you can choose the option to post and have individual conversations with each collaborator sharing the post. This follows the same principle of the BCC address line in your Email client: You share the information with 5 people, but they cannot see your conversation with the others - only the one you have with them and they will not even know you are sharing this information with someone else.

You can do searches for text in the posts and comments in order to easily find a conversation.

You will receive automatic notifications when someone shares a post with you or comments on one of your posts (also on a post shared with you). This also applies when posts or comments are edited or

removed. Notifications are sent by email and shown inside the application. The Email notifications can be disabled at any moment.

Spaces/Files

 You can create spaces and subspaces as you do with folders and subfolders on your desktop computer. These spaces can be shared with multiple collaborators in exactly the same way you would with your posts. Other users can do the same and share their spaces with you; your shared spaces appear in separate section.

Files of any format are uploaded in your spaces or spaces shared with you. The uploaded files are shared with the collaborators sharing the same space. Only the person who uploaded the file and the owner of the space are the owners of the file and are able to remove it.
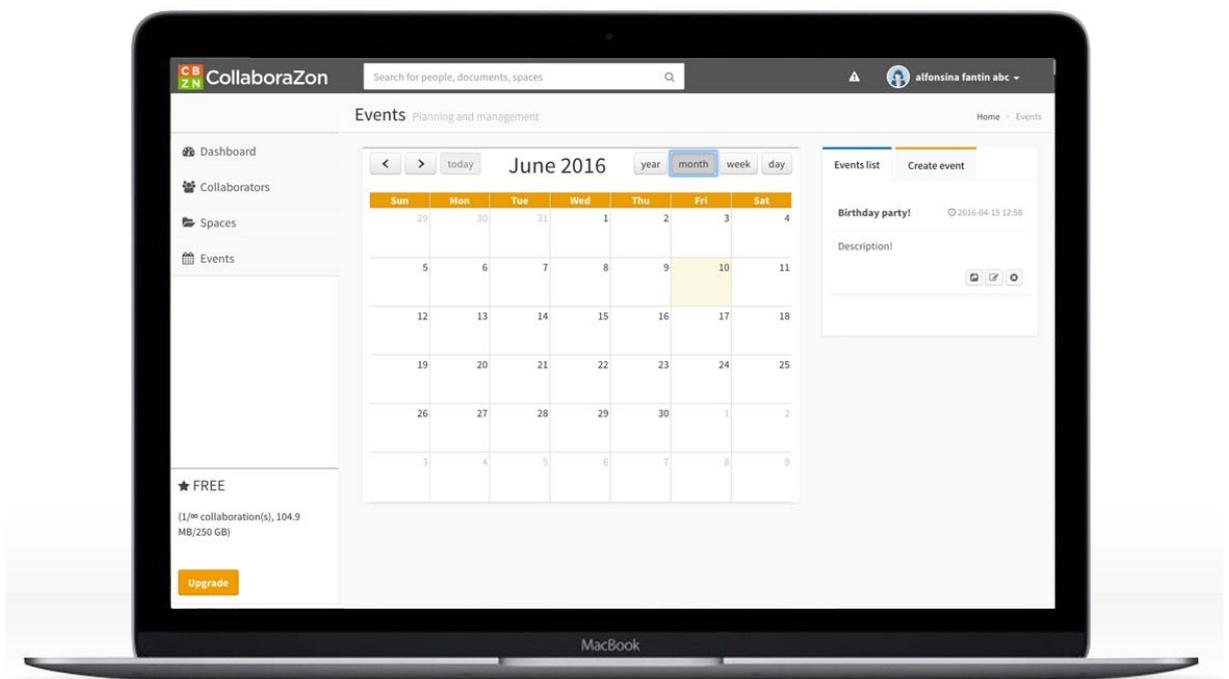
Spaces have a name and a description, allowing you to specify and give details on what the space will contain. The same is true for files; apart from the file name with extension, you can assign a more user friendly name and a more detailed description to a particular file.

Files can be downloaded to your PC to edit the content. Once edited, you can upload it again to the application where it will automatically overwrite the previous version. **CollaboraZon** will generate a copy of the previous versions, allowing you to keep track of all the changes and see the history at any time.

You can do searches for spaces or file names and descriptions to easily locate them in the file system.

Notifications will automatically be sent when someone shares a space or file with you, or whenever a file is uploaded in one of your spaces, which is also the case when a space or file is removed. Notifications are sent via Email and shown inside the application. You can disable the Email notifications whenever you want.

Events

Events can be a crucial help when organising your work or just to remind you of an important deadline. They are added to your calendar and can be shared with multiple collaborators.

Reminders will be sent to you, and your collaborators sharing the same event, on the date of the event at midnight, 30 min and 5 min before the event.

You can do searches for events, names and descriptions in order to locate them easily in the calendar.

Apart from the reminders, you will receive notifications when someone shares an event with you and when an event is edited or removed. Notifications are sent by email and shown inside the application. Email notifications can be disabled at any time.

More to come…

CollaboraZon is an amazing application that will help your team to collaborate more effectively, but we will not stop here. We are working on new useful functionalities to improve your user experience.

Just to name a few of our projects:

- Sharing lists: no need to select your collaborators one by one when sharing a post, space/file or event; you can create lists with the collaborators of a project and share it directly to this list.
- API (Application Programming Interface): if you need to develop an application and want to use the functionalities of **CollaboraZon** (i.e. to use our storage system) we will provide you with an API so you can focus on your business and use our system for the rest.
- Mobile app: currently **CollaboraZon** is compatible with smartphones and the most used web browsers. However, we want to take it a step further and create our own app, allowing our clients to use our application anytime, anywhere.
- Logging of actions: You receive notifications on many actions, however if you are registered as the administrator of your company, you will be able to track any action done on your files and more.

Technical Specifications

We are not going to dwell on technical details, but just point out a few facts:

CollaboraZon is a web application (PUBLIC) accessible by anyone in the world under the URL www.collaborazon.com

But - it can also be installed on your company servers (ENTERPRISE) to make it accessible only to your company stakeholders.

What are the differences?

PUBLIC

- **CollaboraZon** is hosted on our servers in **Europe**. The Application and the Database are located on our servers and backups done daily.
- Application is accessible via the URL: www.collaborazon.com
- The files are stored in the cloud. We use Amazon S3 cloud servers in **Europe**. It benefits from all their physical and technical security.
- When you upload a file, it is sent to Amazon in a secure encrypted way using SSL (as signalled by the added "s" HTTP**S** in your browser).
- Anyone can register as a user and share information with anyone else in the world.
- The administrator user is one of our team members. His role is only to solve technical issues users might have.
- The Administration and Support team will never be able to access data or files of the users.
- Users registered are limited in number of collaborations and storage space depending on the chosen subscription plan. Each plan has set cheap prices (visit our site for more information on prices at www.collaborazon.com/pricing).
- Payments are done through the Paymill payment platform, which is secure and PCI compliant, using Visa or PayPal.

ENTERPRISE

- **CollaboraZon** is hosted on your company servers. The Application and the Database are on your servers. Backups and hosting will have to be managed by you.
- The application is accessible via the URL you have provided.
- The files are stored on your company servers and depend on the security software put in place by your company.
- Anyone you invite can register as a user and share with anyone else, the only limitation exists for users of your company and your external stakeholders.
- The administration and support is taken in charge by one or several of your team members with the help of our support team. They will be able to access data or files of the other users if necessary. This depends mainly on the companies' internal rules, which can easily be adapted in settings.
- Registered users are not limited in number of collaborations or storage space. However, your company can only invite new users depending on the subscription plan chosen, which comprises packages of 10 users. Should you need 100 users, you will have to pay for 10 packages.
- Payments are done through the Paymill payment platform, which is secure and PCI compliant, using Visa or PayPal of the company.

Case Study

The case we are going to focus on is the most common and generic example: *A Company wants to share files and collaborate with distant stakeholders*.

- The company has to create a user account with a company email. This user will be the one representing the company and having the storage of files of the company. Instead of the name of a person it could be called "[Company name] (Admin)".
- The user has to invite all the necessary company employees and external stakeholders to collaborate by using the application or just sending emails. If this is done via the application, the link to the application with automatic acceptance to collaborate will be added to the email.
- Once the user has his network of collaborators, it's time to get to work!
- The user can create a space (folder) under "My spaces".
- The user can share this space with some of his collaborators.
- The user can upload a file to this space which will be automatically shared with the same group of collaborators.
- Collaborators will receive notifications when space is shared with them and when a file is uploaded.
- A post will appear in their Dashboards when they are logged in, allowing them to comment on the file if necessary.
- The collaborators can open the file in their browser or download a copy to their PC's.
- The user can now create an event and share it with the same collaborators e. g. the deadline to review the document that has been uploaded.
- Collaborators will receive a notification that the event has been created. On the day of the event, they will receive some reminders, so they don't forget to finish the revision.
- If the user would like to notify his collaborators about something, a post can be created and shared with these same stakeholders.
- The collaborators will be notified of the new post shared with them and will be able to go and start commenting on it.

- At any time, any stakeholder can decide to create spaces and share them with the user or sub-spaces to a space that the user has shared with them, and then upload files themselves.

Summary

There are many social networks and cloud storage services on the market. We all know the examples of Facebook, Dropbox, Google Drive, etc.; just to mention some of the biggest. They are really good at what they do but they do not cover all the needs of any company needing to collaborate with a spread team. You can store files in some, but not to post and comment; or you can post and comment, but not to store files in a proper file system. Their servers are for the main part abroad, which endangers the security of your data and their enterprise versions are not hosted on your company servers.

CollaboraZon brings all these aspects together. It allows you to store and share your files in an orderly and secure way, whilst giving you the opportunity to liaise with your collaborators in the same direct and fluid way you would on a regular social network.